

Published: March 20, 2013, *Kokomo Tribune* [Page: A4]

http://www.kokomotribune.com/opinion/article_4b8944db-f408-52ff-bb12-1066fb620400.html



KT photo | **Tim Bath**
Rob Burgess, Tribune night editor

House of Burgess: Rodman visit puzzles Koreans

Apparently, they're just as confused as we are.

By Rob Burgess
Tribune columnist

Like several of my readers, I had additional questions after I filed last week's column, "Mr. Rodman goes to Pyongyang." If you'll remember, during his recent overseas trip with Vice Media, former basketball star Dennis Rodman became possibly the only American to ever meet North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un face-to-face. If I was baffled, I wondered what residents of the Korean Peninsula must be thinking.

Luckily, I have a primary source at my disposal. For the last six years, my friend and college roommate, Jonathan, has lived and worked in South Korea, educating the youth there in the ways of the English language. To get a better understanding of the situation on the ground, I asked Jonathan to conduct a man-on-the-street interview for me. Before he did, he told me there might be complications.

“I don’t think most Koreans know enough about who Rodman is or how crazy all the stuff he has done before was,” he told me. “Unfortunately, the meeting has now been further complicated by Kim Jong-un’s threats to turn Washington and Seoul in Sea(s) of Fire since the U.N. sanctions are going forward in response to their third nuclear test.”

A few days later, I received a string of messages from Jonathan. It seems in the meantime, he had interviewed Mr. Sang-Yoon Cho (“James”), 42, a resident of Gunpo, a city in Gyeonggi Province, located about an hour south of Seoul.

“At first, when I heard that story on television, I was so surprised. [I remembered America’s] ping-pong [diplomacy] with China, so at first I thought it might be like that [but with basketball.] If Rodman really decided to visit North Korea by himself, it is ridiculous,” said James. “In my case, [if I want to go up there], I have to get permission from the [South Korean] government. If I [went] up there [without permission], when I came back I [would] have to go to jail.”

Jonathan then asked James about Rodman's standing in South Korea prior to his visit to the North.

"As far as I knew, he was a good [basketball] player, but his manners were very bad," said James. "Even in Korea, his reputation was not very good."

Finally, Jonathan told James some people in America were calling for Rodman to be brought up on treason charges for his visit, which was not endorsed by the U.S. State Department.

"I think if some people think like this, it is not fair," said James. "I think there could be some secret negotiation between North Korea and America [through Rodman] possibly."

If this was the case, the American government showed no signs of it being true.

"The Pentagon announced Friday it will spend \$1 billion to add 14 interceptors to an Alaska-based missile defense system, responding to what it called faster-than-anticipated North Korean progress on nuclear weapons and missiles," reported the Associated Press. "In announcing the decision, Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel said he is determined to protect the U.S. homeland and stay ahead of a worrisome North Korean missile threat. He acknowledged that the interceptors already in place to defend against potential North Korean missile strikes have had poor test performances."

For his part, Rodman hasn't provided much in the way of clarity since returning from his trip. On March 12, the same day the North Korean government announced all treaties with the South to be null and void, Rodman told KVLV-KXJB that he planned a vacation with Kim Jong-un for August. And then, the very next day, he once again inserted himself into another developing world news story.

"Rodman promised to be in St. Peter's Square ... in a makeshift popemobile as he campaigns for Cardinal Peter Turkson of Ghana to become the first black pope," reported the AP's Nicole Winfield on March 13. Rodman, of course, was not successful in this task, as Jorge Mario Bergoglio was elected Pope Francis the same day.

I heartily thank Jonathan and James for their insight. However, I still feel so confused. And I certainly never thought Dennis Rodman of all people would be at the center of so many sensitive global news stories. I have absolutely no clue what will happen next. But, then again, I'm pretty sure I'm in good company. I don't think Rodman or Kim Jong-un do either.

Rob Burgess, Tribune night editor, may be reached by calling 765-454-8577, via email at rob.burgess@kokomotribune.com or on Twitter at www.twitter.com/robaburg.